REPORT

Understanding Homelessness for Urban Indigenous Families: How Can We Envision Gendered and Culturally Safe Responses

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Executive Summary

Family homelessness is a complex and pervasive issue in Canada. Particularly troubling is the overrepresentation of Indigenous families in Canada's emergency shelters and in unsafe/unstable housing. Indigenous families headed by women are at high risk for racist and violent practices and particular attention needs to be paid to their gendered and cultural experiences.

Western definitions articulate that homelessness occurs when an individual or family is without safe, permanent, and/or appropriate housing and are without prospects for achieving such housing. There are multi-factorial reasons for homelessness, including individual-level risk factors, interpersonal factors and/or systemic factors (e.g., a lack of affordable housing). Understanding homelessness for Indigenous Peoples means regarding homelessness as a lack of housing, but also as the isolation or separation of Indigenous Peoples from their connections to land, place, water, family, each other, animals, languages, cultures, and identities (Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness, 2012; Thistle, 2017). Understanding homelessness for Indigenous Peoples means examining the legacy impacts of assimilation policies of colonialism and acknowledging that current polices and practices are grounded in historical and structural racism against Indigenous peoples. In this study with women, we acknowledge that it is also necessary to understand and examine structural violence as an intersecting and interconnected experience.

This study was led by non-Indigenous researchers in partnership with Elders and knowledge keepers. The Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness acted as an advisory committee. Guidance and advice was sought from study inception and design through data collection and analysis.

Our team took up a qualitative approach with 12 women living in emergency shelters or in unsafe or unstable housing with children in their care. Elders were present in the interviews if women requested this. Open-ended interview questions asked about women's experiences of homelessness, how the women conceptualized racism, intergenerational trauma, violence, necessary supports for exiting homelessness, and their hopes for their families. We used phenomenological thematic analysis, which explores the meanings behind how participants conceptualize their experiences. The aim was to ground emergent themes within the lived experiences of Indigenous women, rather than imposing a framework on their stories. Second, we used a policy analysis framework that views policies as active constructions of governments and systems and contain representations of the 'problems' they appear to address, rather than viewing policies as simple responses to problems that need to be solved.

We identified five distinct themes affecting Indigenous women in the context of family homelessness: jurisdictional separation between sectors; racism; lack of safety; the need for family and limited opportunities to heal from trauma. The primary 'systems' or approaches that women talked about were the housing sector, including current approaches to assessment

and prioritization, and the child welfare system. Women also discussed multiple experiences of racism from landlords.

We argue that structural violence is present in systems and policies that impede women's opportunities to exit homelessness and heal from trauma. This structural violence normalizes racism and goes largely unchallenged. The women in our study experienced structural violence in the housing market, from child protective services, and in the homeless-serving system, all of which are intersecting and interconnected. Aspects of these systems affect the potential of these families to be safe and achieve their desired futures, as women are forced to internalize and accept racist and harmful approaches.

If we limit our understanding of homelessness to Western conceptualizations related to 'structures' or physical places, we might suggest alternatives that focus on improvements to housing systems; to health and safety standards; to reduce family separation and to bridge gaps between sectors. While these are important to consider, when we understand that homelessness for Indigenous families is grounded in hundreds of years of racist and discriminatory policies and practices that systematically exclude and marginalize Indigenous Peoples, we begin to understand the breadth and depth of complexities and barriers that families face in their efforts for stability and safety. This dramatically shifts how we think about solutions, which must acknowledge and respond to deeply entrenched structural violence and focus on changes to systems and structures.

Background

A list of definitions is available in Appendix 1. Of note, *Indigenous* typically includes individuals with First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit ancestry in Canada. The research study and themes this report outlines are based on the research team's inclusion of Indigenous women experiencing urban homelessness in Calgary, Alberta. As researchers, we recognize that the perspectives of the women interviewed in the study do not represent the entire experience of homelessness for Indigenous Peoples, nor do we believe that all experiences of homelessness are homogenous. Instead, we attempt to present Indigenous women's experiences of homelessness in an urban setting to examine some of the barriers, and the need for structural change to disrupt them.

As non-Indigenous researchers, we are honoured to have worked with members of the Indigenous community in Calgary in the research conducted for this paper. The authors of this paper partnered with two Community Advisory Groups (including Elders) to conduct research in Calgary, Alberta on the traditional lands of the people of the Treaty 7 region, including the Blackfoot Confederacy (the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations), and the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

Definitions of Homelessness

There is a distinct difference in Western definitions of homelessness and the definitions conceptualized by Indigenous communities. By Western definitions, and the commonly defined conception of homelessness in Canada, homelessness occurs when an individual or family is without safe, permanent, and/or appropriate housing and are without prospects for immediately achieving such housing (Gaetz et al., 2012). There are multi-factorial reasons for homelessness, including individual-level risk factors (e.g., mental health, behavioral, or physical challenges or disabilities), interpersonal factors (e.g., discrimination, adverse childhood experiences), and/or systemic factors (e.g., a lack of affordable housing) (Gaetz et al., 2012, Herman et al., 1997).

Homelessness experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada goes beyond the definitions of absolute or relative homelessness as described above. Reframing conceptions of "home" to include Indigenous worldviews is necessary to understand perceptions of homelessness, the reasons for homelessness among Indigenous populations and necessary responses. Western definitions of the home combine ideas of social norms with physical structures (Homeward Trust Edmonton, Blue Quills First Nations College, & IRM Research and Evaluation, 2015), Indigenous views regard homelessness as not only a lack of housing, but also as the isolation of Indigenous Peoples from their connections to land, place, water, family, each other, animals, languages, cultures, and identities (Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness, (ASCHH) 2012; Thistle, 2017). Although Indigenous Peoples worldwide may not have identical conceptions of homelessness (Andrews, 2004; Hay 1998, Kearns, 2006 & Christiansen, 2013), Thornton (2008)

argues that Indigenous Peoples have a special relationship to place. Christenson (2013) notes that this idea is both cultural and political, and relates to an individual's sense of belonging and identity.

For Indigenous populations, homelessness encompasses a breakdown of social and cultural connection caused by structural violence against Indigenous Peoples that stems from Canada's colonial legacy. Thistle (2017) defines 12 inter-connected dimensions of homelessness based on the ASCHH (2012) definition of homelessness noted above:

- **Historic displacement homelessness**, where Indigenous populations have been removed or displaced from pre-colonial lands and waterways (affecting hunting and subsistence patterns).

- **Contemporary geographic separation homelessness**, where Indigenous populations have been separated from current tribal, community, and national lands and waterways.

- **Spiritual disconnection homelessness**, where Indigenous Peoples have been separated from their Indigenous culture.

- **Mental disruption and imbalance homelessness**, where there is a loss of healthy mental functioning due to the discrimination, exclusion, forced assimilation, and marginalization experienced by Indigenous Peoples due to a history of colonization.

- **Cultural disintegration and loss homelessness**, where Indigenous Peoples have lost Indigenous cultures, knowledges, identities, names, languages, gender roles, songs, traditions, rites of passage, kinships, and community supports, which dislocates Indigenous Peoples from within their society or *All My Relations*.

- **Overcrowding homelessness**, where Indigenous households are more likely to experience overcrowding, creating potentially unsafe and unhealthy environments and increasing risks for eviction and stress.

- **Relocation and mobility homelessness**, where constant travel related to access to work, subsistence, health services, legal proceedings, children, or connection to community may lead to homelessness.

- **Going home homelessness**, referring to when an Indigenous individual or family who grew up outside of their home community who returns to their community but is unable to secure a physical home due to legislative, bureaucratic, or discriminatory barriers.

- **Nowhere to go homelessness**, where Indigenous individuals may have a complete lack of access to stable shelter but also have nowhere to go because of a lack of kin supports, a lack of knowledge about housing support services, lack of funds to secure travel or housing, or community banishment, among others.

- **Escaping or evading harm homelessnes**s, where an Indigenous person may need to flee an unstable, unsafe, or overcrowded household for their survival.

- **Emergency crisis homelessness**, where Indigenous Peoples may face homelessness due to natural disasters and environmental impacts which, combined with a lack of political will, racism, and a lack of emergency planning, can cause and complicate housing.

- **Climatic refugee homelessness**, where Indigenous communities whose relationship with the land, water, and animals have been drastically altered due to climate change, leading to disruption and displacement.

Indigenous conceptions of homelessness are considered in this report to create a fuller understanding of women's experiences.

Family Homelessness in Canada

The number of families experiencing homelessness in Canada is concerning, especially considering the increase of families relying on emergency shelters in recent years (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014; Segaert, 2012). Over 37% of Canadian households are unstably housed (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014). Families experiencing homelessness stay in shelters two to three times as long as single adults (Segaert, 2012). Of these families, over 90% are headed by women (Robrecht & Anderson, 2006). Households headed by women face additional and complex gender-specific vulnerabilities. In studies examining the characteristics of mothers experiencing homelessness or in low-income housing, this group faces an increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health issues, sexual exploitation, violence, and assault (Bassuk, Volk, & Oliver, 2010; Paradis & Mosher, 2012). Indigenous women, face additional vulnerabilities due to intersections of oppression through gender, race and culture (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014; Distasio, Zell, & Snyder, 2018). Moving back and forth from home communities to urban centres can also add complexities in terms of episodes of homelessness which can impact service access (Thurston, Milaney, Turner, Coupal, 2013).

Indigenous Peoples and Homelessness

One in five urban Indigenous persons is likely to be homeless on any given night compared to 1 in 128 non-Indigenous persons (Distasio, Zell, & Snyder, 2018). Approximately 34% of women experiencing homelessness in Calgary are Indigenous, although Indigenous people account for only 2.70% of the overall population in the city (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014; World Population Review, 2020). In 2019, 51% of families served at one of Calgary's family shelters were Indigenous (Inn From the Cold, 2020).

Loss of culture due to the effects of Canada's history of colonization and government assimilation policies plays a major role in the current over representation of Indigenous people who experience homelessness. Today, Indigenous Peoples are routinely subjected to structural violence through systemic discrimination (i.e., financial, political, legal, and religious systems). Oppressive social structures are often normalized within society, subsequently, they are almost never challenged (Farmer et al., 2006). Colonial legacies like residential schools and the Sixties Scoop

have created trauma and distrust of government systems, making Indigenous populations more vulnerable to homelessness (Thurston, Oelke, Turner, & Bird, 2013). The child welfare system, is one example, where Indigenous families are significantly more likely to be investigated and have their children taken away than non-Indigenous families (Sinha et al., 2011; Trocme, Knocke, & Blackstock, 2004).

Despite this disparity, due to the invisible nature of structural violence, inequities in the life outcomes of many Indigenous Peoples (e.g., poverty, housing instability, higher morbidity and mortality, decreased employment opportunities) are not perceived as violent acts (Distasio, Zell, & Snyder, 2081; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal health, 2013). Instead, victims of structural violence are often held responsible for the inequities they are structurally subjected to.

Housing First & the Need for Culturally-Safe Housing Models for Indigenous Families

Culturally safe and appropriate services are needed to provide housing and supports for Indigenous families experiencing homelessness (Thurston, Oelke, Turner, & Bird, 2013). However, current interventions are rarely focused on the specific needs of Indigenous families. For example, Housing First is a harm reduction housing model for housing chronically homeless individuals with dual diagnoses (Goering, 2014). Housing First provides individuals with access to housing and optional self-directed wrap-around supports (Goering, 2014), and aims to promote sustained exits from homelessness, improved health outcomes, and reduced costs. The Housing First model has been shown to be effective in housing individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness and who are facing mental health or substance use issues (Goering et al., 2014; Kertesz et al., 2009; Padgett, Gulcur, & Tsemberis, 2006). However, Housing First is not always an effective model for Indigenous families if independent living is a goal. Approaches that rely on putting 'family first' are more family oriented and collectivist in nature and that facilitate inclusion of Indigenous ceremony and spirituality are argued to be more meaningful and relevant to developing a sense of 'home' for Indigenous families (ASCHH, 2019a).

Methods

The aim of this study is to better understand homelessness among urban Indigenous families, as informed by their gendered and cultural experiences. Further, we understand and apply the view of homelessness first articulated by ASCHH (2012) to seek solutions that could better meet the needs of Indigenous families. To this end, this study asks: what are the experiences of homelessness for Indigenous families; how are these experiences rooted in gendered and cultural trauma, and; how can housing models reflect Indigenous women's experiences?

We conducted a qualitative study with Indigenous women who had experiences with homelessness. Women were eligible to participate in the study if: they self-identified as Indigenous; were living in shelter or had been housed within the last 3 years; had a child or children in their care, and; were living in an urban setting (Calgary, Alberta).

Two groups of community advisors guided the project. First, two women Elders advised the research team on culturally-appropriate methods of engagement, reviewed interview questions, helped to interview participants, and helped to interpret and analyze the data. Second, the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness (ASCHH) informed the research team on the current state of homelessness in Calgary, facilitated relationships with Elders and access to interview space. The community advisory groups gave feedback throughout the project on appropriate recruitment and on how to create safe spaces for discussions with the women.

Women were recruited via snowball sampling. Our Elder advisors had access to the target population and helped to describe the study to Indigenous women experiencing homelessness. Women who participated in the interviews were also asked to share information about the study with other women. Potential participants then contacted members of the research team via phone or email to learn more about the study and to set up an interview. Recruitment occurred from October 2018 to January 2019.

Interviews were 1-2 hours long and took place individually and in groups (depending on the desires of the women). Women were invited to bring their children to the interview, to reduce barriers to participation. To promote trust and facilitate conversation, a meal was provided to the woman and their family and participants had the opportunity to make a tobacco pouch during the interview (as recommended by the Community Advisory Group). Women received a $50 honorarium per engagement to honor their time and their stories. Interviews and questions were voluntary and women could choose not to answer any questions they wished. Elders were present in the interviews when the women requested this.

Open-ended interview questions examined women's experiences of homelessness, how the woman conceptualized individual and systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, family violence, cultural beliefs, necessary supports for exiting homelessness, and their hopes for their families.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using two methods. First, we used phenomenological thematic analysis, which explores the meanings behind how participants conceptualize their experiences (Grbich, 2007). The aim was to ground emergent themes within the lived experiences of Indigenous women, rather than imposing a framework on their stories. Second, we used a policy analysis framework (*Analyzing Policy: What is the problem represented to be?*) (Bacchi, 2009) that views policies as active constructions of governments and systems and contain representations of the 'problems' they appear to address, rather than viewing policies as simple responses to problems that need to be solved. Bacchi's analysis framework is outlined in Table 1. A systems-level policy analysis is imperative to understanding the factors affecting the disproportionate prevalence of homelessness for Indigenous families in Calgary.

Table 1: Analyzing Policy: What is the Problem Represented to Be? (Bacchi, 2009)

Question	Goal
What's the problem of (e.g., domestic violence, poverty, etc.) represented to be in a specific policy?	To identify the implied problem representation in specific policies.
What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?	To identify and analyze the conceptual logics that underpin specific problem representations. The term 'conceptual logic' refers to meanings that must be in place for a particular problem representation to cohere or make sense.
How did this representation of the 'problem' come about?	To highlight the conditions that allow a particular problem representation to take shape and to assume dominance.
What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?	To raise reflection and consideration about issues and perspectives silenced.
What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?	To identify the effects of specific problem representations so that they can be critically assessed.
How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted, and replaced?	To pay attention both to the means through which some problem representations become dominant, and to the possibility of challenging problem representations that are judged to be harmful.

Findings

Results of Phenomenological Thematic Analysis:

Overall, 12 women with children in their care were interviewed. We identified five distinct themes affecting Indigenous women in the context of family homelessness, summarized in Table 1: jurisdictional separation between sectors; racism; lack of safety; the need for family and limited opportunities to heal from trauma.

See table 2 next page

Jurisdictional Separation between Sectors

In Canada, there is severe underfunding and a lack of availability for on-reserve housing for Indigenous families (primarily affecting Status First Nations populations). Overcrowding and couch surfing are the result, which leads to migration into the urban centre (Webster, 2015).

As a result, many families have had to move to urban centres.

> *"I think a lot of people, they move to the city hoping that they will get a job, or go back to school and have a place, because there is no housing back home."*

Due to jurisdictional issues regarding the responsibility of providing supports for Indigenous families who are living off-reserve, women in our study indicated that they had been passed back and forth between systems. Neither urban housing supports nor their home communities had successfully housed these families.

> *"[If] you go to your First Nations band, they tell you, 'well you're living off the reserve. We can only help people that are living on reserve', and you go to the people off-reserve, they say, 'go to your band'."*

This divide between systems resulted in a lack of supports for women, despite being entitled to the services. For example, one woman had been rejected for financial aid because she lived off-reserve, and because she had a partner who was not Indigenous.

Supports for the women were given in an ad hoc manner. Women were unaware of supports for which they were eligible and often had to try and access services many times before information regarding these supports was given. For example, one woman had been dealing with a long-term disability but only recently was told that she qualified for disability financial supports. Similarly, other women who had been screened for eligibility for Housing First programs did not receive follow-up, did not qualify because they had not been homeless for six consecutive months or did not understand the Housing First approach. Some of the women had been unstably

Table 2: Themes from Qualitative Interviews

Theme	Description	Example
Jurisdictional Separation Between Sectors	Eligibility requirements for Indigenous families trying to access supports and services (including on-reserve housing) may lead to *absolute or relative homelessness*, but also may lead to *going home homelessness or nowhere to go homelessness*.	*"[If] you go to your First Nations band, they tell you, 'well you're living off the reserve. We can only help people that are living on reserve', and you go to the people off-reserve, they say, 'go to your band'."*
Racism	Interpersonal and structural racism affected women's interactions with landlords, services, and systems.	*"[The landlord said] 'Yeah, well the next time I'm not helping Natives out. I only did this because I know you weren't gonna get a place', [because we were Indigenous]."*
Lack of Safety	Many Indigenous women had experienced trauma and continued to experience trauma related to their homelessness.	Violent partners or histories of abuse led to trauma for the women; landlords and systems exacerbated the trauma by providing only unsafe living spaces.
The Need for Family	Keeping families together was important for the women. However, systems (e.g., housing, child welfare) affect women's capacity to obtain this.	*"If I'm looking for a house, I'm going to be looking for my family. Not me alone".*
Limited Opportunities to Heal from Trauma	Women had no space to heal from the trauma they had experienced, and were continually being re-traumatized through interpersonal, intergenerational, and/or structural violence.	*"Losing my mother really young, I kind of had to grow up and be a parent for my brothers, so I always had that where I felt like I prefer my brothers succeed rather than me."*

housed for many years and had been in contact with housing and homelessness service providers, indicating that information was not being given to all families regarding available supports.

Supports that were helpful included having a service provider advocate for the family with landlords to ensure that repairs were made before move-in, and to hold them accountable to legislation and policy (e.g. health and safety standards).

Participants felt that, even though they were entitled to certain supports, there was discrimination in the provision of services, resulting in barriers to access. Misconceptions from others (including service providers) led to assumptions that Indigenous families are given financial supports because of their Indigenous status (regardless of whether the women were First Nations, Inuit, or Métis). If women were eligible for funding from their home community, it was usually in small amounts that were insufficient in supporting their families. However, resentment against perceived funding for Indigenous people was evident, indicating a lack of understanding regarding Treaty legislation.

> *"'Oh, you're from Blood? They have lots of money. You guys get money every month.' We do? I've lived in the city for over 40 years. I've never received any kind of help..."*

Racism

Many women experienced overt racism from landlords, affecting their ability to obtain and retain housing.

> *"I found a place and this landlord, same thing he tells me. No more Natives."*

Women in our study also reported experiences of more subtle forms of racism from landlords where a potential landlord would tell them that the unit had been rented (when the listing was still available), or would be rude to their family to discourage them from renting. Participants understood from their experiences that being Indigenous meant landlords would be less inclined to rent to them due to deeply entrenched societal stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding Indigenous identity.

Even landlords with overt racist behavior recognized the structural racism faced by Indigenous women and how this affected their ability to get housing.

> *"[The landlord said] if I go out there, no one's going to help me because I'm Native. I've... witnessed it, trying to get my own place here."*

> *"[The landlord said] 'Yeah, well the next time I'm not helping Natives out. I only did this because I know you weren't gonna get a place', [because we were Indigenous]."*

Racism likewise affected the women's ability to gain employment, consequently, perpetuating their housing instability. Many women described going to interviews for jobs for which they were qualified, not being hired, and then seeing that the job was still posted after their interview. They could not prove that they were not being hired because of their Indigenous status, but did note the scarcity of Indigenous people in the workforce.

"If you go to the hospital and if you look at how many people are working there, you don't see [Indigenous people working there]."

Lack of Safety

In our study, many women had experienced trauma, due to partner violence, partners with addictions, or having a partner unexpectedly die. These traumas left the women vulnerable to homelessness, both economically and socially. This also resulted in a sudden loss of income, and in having to leave their home and move to the city to search for better opportunities (e.g., with a partner death or when escaping domestic violence). Violence often resulted in a loss of emotional and social supports, both in their partner, but also through isolation from their communities, due to the need to move away.

For many women, their housing was unsafe for their families due to violations of minimum health and housing standards which their landlords would not resolve. One woman reported renting a home where the walls were covered in mold before she moved in. When she reported this to the landlord, he painted over the mold. Ultimately, the woman had to move out due to health concerns for her children, but lost her security deposit because the landlord blamed her for the mold issue. Another family felt intimidated by their landlord, who would enter their suite without consent. This woman felt unsafe due to fear of sexual violence against her and her female family members. Another woman was forced to share the washer and dryer in her unit with other members of the building complex who could enter her unit without her consent, as they keys to her suite.

Most of the women who were exposed to unsafe housing felt trapped due to financial instability and their safety deposits (which would be a means to move into another property) being with-held by the landlords. Mistreatment from landlords often led families to leave their home quickly or to be evicted without adequate notice. Women did not feel confident in fighting against the abuse. Many only found out their rights and that they had grounds to fight the violations after they had already left the rental situation. Even when informed of their rights, many felt scared of fighting as they were worried about eviction and having their lives uprooted again. One woman talked about her experience where the landlord gave her insufficient notice to leave the property, a situation where she lost her safety deposit and possessions, causing greater financial and housing insecurity.

"She was going to up the rent to $1400 and I can't afford that... So she gave me 15 days and I couldn't find nothing within 15 days, so I had to sell my furniture... I just sold everything, gave everything away. And then we had only [our] clothes and we were back at my friends, being homeless again."

One woman had been going through legal channels regarding a rental unit for several months, but many other women did not have the financial or social capital to pursue legal battles. The policies and systems put in place to protect tenants are failing these women. Overall, the lack of protections and limited options created vulnerability, leading women to believe that they would be mistreated in the housing system and left without the financial privilege for a better situation or to seek justice. Ultimately, this meant that women in our study were forced to settle for unsafe, substandard housing. One woman noted that:

"I feel like I'm just settling again because I want to get out of [the shelter]".

The Need for Family

Family was a significant source of support and sense of purpose. For the women in our study, family went beyond immediate kin, sometimes extending to their whole community. One of the Elders in our study described the importance of family for Indigenous Peoples:

"The blood doesn't define family where it stops. [White] people say, 'my first cousin, my first cousin once removed'. What? What is that? If the same blood runs through your veins as does mine, you're my brother or you're my sister."

Large, deeply connected families were seen as both natural and necessary, linking back to the belief in cultural connections and family as a source of 'home'. Lack of family contributed to their experiences of homelessness. Participants reported that housing systems did not consider the women's desire to live with kin outside of their nuclear family or to move in with their adult children. One woman who had two sons over the age of 18 noted that "If I'm looking for a house, I'm going to be looking [for one] for my family. Not me alone". The families did not see their adult children living with them as a burden, but as a blessing. For many women, having other adults (including adult children) in their home was a source of emotional support.

"[My daughter] says, 'mom you know I'll never leave you', and I could see that happening because me and my daughter have gone through so much, it has kind of made us tighter. I could never see myself telling my daughter she's gotta go."

Keeping family together is essential. However, child apprehensions from Child Protective Services are highest among Indigenous populations (Blackstock et al., 2004; Navia, Henderson, & First Charger, 2018). In our study, some of the women could not speak to how painful it was to be away

from their children who had been apprehended. Even those who were still with their children were fearful that someone would take their children away.

Many intergenerational families were present in our study. Many grandparents had not officially adopted their grandchildren because they hoped the child's parents would be able to reclaim care for their children. However, this prevented the grandparents from being able to access financial and other supports associated with parenthood. Even without these financial supports, the women as grandparents felt responsible to care for their families.

> *"No, I don't get nothing for my grandson. I never asked, and I don't know... I was gonna go to court to get legal guardianship of him, but at the same time, [his] mother is still with me, so why?"*

> *"I'm happy to have my boys... but one income, that's really hard on me right now."*

The women were reluctant to accept help and worried about burdening others in their family. However, bearing all of the financial responsibilities took its toll on those grandparents who were already financially struggling.

> *"If I had that choice, I would never take money from my child to pay for rent... that's kind of my responsibility... but then [my daughter] saw what it was doing to me. She said, 'no mom, I'm gonna pay half the rent, no ifs and buts about it.' So we share the rent now."*

Limited Opportunities to Heal from Trauma

Indigenous families in our study had no space to heal from the trauma they had experienced, and were continually being re-traumatized through interpersonal, intergenerational, and/or structural violence. Women seemed to bear the effects of the trauma as the emotional caretakers of their families, recounting stories of deaths in their families and other traumas. The duty to care for their family was their responsibility, leading to high levels of emotional and financial labour to help heal.

> *"Losing my mother really young, I kind of had to grow up and be a parent for my brothers, so I always had that where I felt like I prefer my brothers succeed rather than me. Like I stayed back home and I raised my first nephew, let my brother go back to school, and then my younger brother, I raised three of his babies so he can go back to school."*

> *"I always find myself, I'm always taking others that are in need... My dad used to tell me 'my girl, your heart is too big for your own good'."*

Housing systems were another place of trauma for the women and their families. The women understood that exposing their trauma to service providers was the only way for their vulnerability to be recognized by the 'system', but the system provided limited supports for healing this trauma. Services were prioritized based on 'acuity' or depth of trauma, leading the women to focus on exhibiting greater vulnerability. One woman noted that:

> *"it's wrong to say you have to use your disability to get somewhere, but you do."*

Women resented having to constantly disclose their trauma to service providers:

> *"I have to tell my story over and over and over and over again, and nothing's happening." Furthermore, the women felt that some service providers were desensitized: "People don't wanna listen... there's no compassion."*

The requirement of repeated trauma disclosure or victimhood to gain services or to be a priority for housing, affected the women's dignity and sense of worth. They felt they had to be in the most desperate of situations before they were seen as 'deserving' of help. This forced women to capitalize on their pain to gain needed supports, the result amounted to structural violence because it caused further harm. This 'deficit' lens made participants feel like an afterthought within the continuum of care. Structural violence was internalized by some of the women, who felt they were less deserving of help or that they had not earned what they did have access to. One woman reported frustration after giving rent to a landlord who was racist to her family. She wanted to move out but since the rent money was partially paid for by her disability cheque, she felt less entitled to ask for a refund as the money was not from employment. Another woman had internalized responsibility for unfair treatment, recounting her experience with a landlord who did not show up for a rental viewing by saying that the landlord "gave [me] another chance" by rescheduling, despite her being the wronged party.

Results of Policy Analysis

Using Bacchi's method, we investigated how the women understood their struggles in relation to policy, mapping how housing assessment and triage processes and child apprehension policies created issues in their lives.

Housing Intake Assessment Tools & Indigenous Family Homelessness

Figure 1 displays an analysis of the Housing First process as described by participants. The theories and assumptions behind the drivers of homelessness impaired housing access for these families. Policy-makers assume that complexities around physical and mental health (e.g., dual diagnoses) are drivers of homelessness. However, policy and housing models intended to address these assumed drivers are inadequate to address the realities of homelessness distinct

for Indigenous families. This led to barriers to accessing housing programs. This is partially due to traumas that have their roots in Canada's colonial legacy (e.g. housing and employment discrimination against Indigenous Peoples), but also due to the disparity between Indigenous conceptions of homelessness and the limited definition of Western homelessness (i.e., absolute or relative lack of stable shelter).

Housing First models for individuals with substance use and mental health issues may not meet the needs of Indigenous families. Jurisdictional issues, needs for home, experiences of racism, lack of safety and needs for healing for trauma are different for families than that of single adults. Addressing the vulnerabilities of Indigenous women and their families requires designing housing models with these in mind while simultaneously prioritizing these women within the housing continuum.

Figure 1: Analysis of Housing First (HF) Model for Indigenous Families in Calgary

Problem

Indeginous families are not considered vulnerable enough for housing

Assumptions

Chronic homelessness = greeter need for housing

Context

At Home/Chez Soi Study

Homeless population considered as primarly single adults

Gaps

Vulnerability indexes not concerned with intergenerational trauma or diverse family structures

Children not recognized as impacting vulnerability

Effects

Long waiting lists for Indegenous families

Structural Racism

Distrust of housing systems

Structural violence

Replacements

Disrupt scarcity problem that prioritizes most vulnerable and focus on developing continuu of housing for Indeginous Peoples
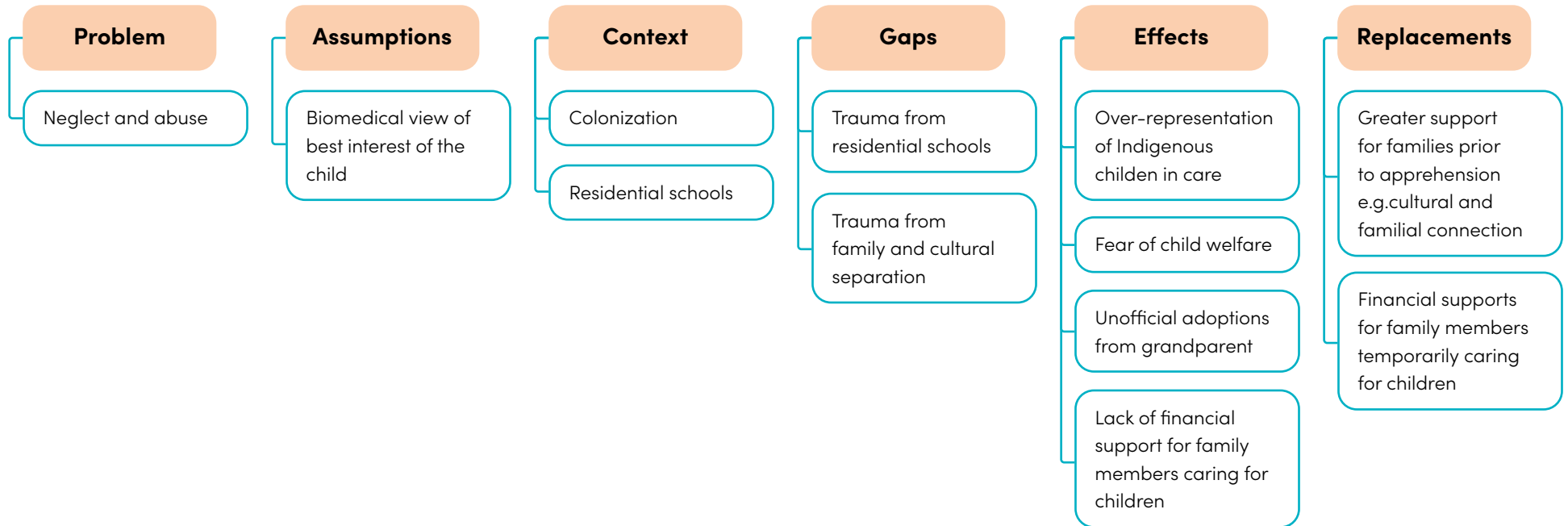
Child Apprehensions & Indigenous Family Homelessness

Figure 2 displays an analysis of child apprehensions. Residential schools were the primary source of 'child welfare' for Indigenous children in Canada, it was common for Indigenous children to attend residential school (Blackstock et al., 2004), in fact, the last residential school closed in 1996. Similar to the outcomes of the residential schools, child welfare has become a primary influence in continuing governmental policies reflecting the assimilation of Indigenous children. These policies were and are intended to serve the *'best interest of the child'*. However, assumptions regarding what is in the best interest of the child primarily focuses on the biomedical or physical needs of children, such as physical neglect and/or abuse. Many policies overlook Indigenous conceptions of home and culture (Thistle, 2017). In order to avoid child welfare apprehensions, many Indigenous grandparents are unofficially 'adopting' their grandchildren to prevent separation from their community and family. However, this prevents grandparents from accessing financial supports associated with parenthood, such as the child tax benefit. While updates to Alberta provincial legislation (as recent as 2016 and 2019) include recognition of the importance of identity, language and culture (Revised Statutes of Alberta 2000, Chapter C-12) there remains a lack of awareness or recognition of the legacy affects of colonial policies of assimilation or any role that current policy plays in exacerbating inequities.

There is a need for service providers and policy makers to understand what Indigenous families need, from their perspective, and to re-design or adapt systems to meet these needs.

Figure 2: Analysis of Child Welfare Approach for Indigenous Families

Problem

Neglect and abuse

Assumptions

Biomedical view of best interest of the child

Context

Colonization

Residential schools

Gaps

Trauma from residential schools

Trauma from family and cultural separation

Effects

Over-representation of Indigenous childen in care

Fear of child welfare

Unofficial adoptions from grandparent

Lack of financial support for family members caring for children

Replacements

Greater support for families prior to apprehension e.g.cultural and familial connection

Financial supports for family members temporarily caring for children

Discussion

Structural violence is present in the systems and policies affecting the experiences of homelessness for Indigenous women and their families, impeding their opportunities to exit and heal from trauma. This structural violence normalizes racism and goes largely unchallenged. The women in our study experienced structural violence in the housing market, from child protective services, and in the homeless-serving system, all of which are intersecting and interconnected. Aspects of these systems affect the potential of these families to be safe and achieve their desired futures, as women are forced to internalize and accept racist and harmful approaches.

Similar to other research on experiences of racism for Indigenous Peoples in Canada (e.g., Clark et al., 2014), the women in our study experienced interpersonal racism from multiple sources, including lay people, employers, and their landlords. Participants shared experiences of internalizing this, where racism enforced feelings of unworthiness, inhibiting their opportunities to seek and receive justice, thus perpetuating unsafe situations. Systemic racism that creates structural inequity continues to exist in Canadian services and policies, and is based in the forced assimilation of Indigenous Peoples through discriminatory and harmful practices (Bastien et al., 2003; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Indigenous women in particular are especially vulnerable. Historically, Indigenous women hold positions of importance within their community (Halseth, 2013). However, these roles have been subjugated by Canadian policies. For example, the requirement of Indigenous women to forfeit their Indigenous status and rights if they married a non-Indigenous man (which was not required of Indigenous men) (McGrath & Stevenson, 1996). This legacy continues to create disproportionate trauma for Indigenous women (Allen & Smiley, 2015).

Apprehension policies focusing on the physical needs of a child rather than the 'familial, spiritual and cultural needs' do not reflect the emotional and social determinants that promote children's wellness, including cultural and familial connection. These policies disproportionately affect Indigenous families and lead to more child separations (Sinha et al., 2011). Such policies perpetuate the intergenerational trauma experienced by many Indigenous communities (Navia, Henderson, & First Charger, 2018) and the colonial legacies that have enforced this trauma. In our study, the women were balancing attempting to heal from intense trauma while supporting their families (including grandchildren), but were severely under-supported, and lived in fear of losing their children, leading to emotional and financial burden.

The researchers entered this project with the aim of investigating and suggesting policy adaptation to the Housing First model. However, suggesting adaptations is premature given the lack of engagement that Indigenous families have had with program and policy development. Many participants were not aware of Housing First or subsidized housing and instead were trying to attain market housing. Some participants had been exposed to housing assessment tools, but most felt that they needed to be adapted to be more inclusive of their experiences (e.g., greater value on culture and homelessness, consideration of children). This lack of awareness indicates

a need for engagement with Indigenous women regarding housing programs and how they can be more inclusive and safe for raising families.

Researchers and decision-makers should not impose theory when constructing policy, but rather should shape these policies on the lived experiences of experts. For Indigenous families experiencing homelessness, theories and assumptions behind the drivers of homelessness act as a form of structural violence that impair their access to housing. For example, many Housing First programs prioritize chronically homeless individuals. However, for Indigenous families experiencing housing instability or homelessness, this means that the housing system does not prioritize their experiences.

If we limited our understanding of homelessness to Western conceptualizations related to 'structures' or physical places, that have largely emerged since cuts to housing programs in the 1980's, we might suggest alternatives that focus on pragmatic changes to improve understanding of housing systems and funding opportunities; to improve accountability of health and safety standards; to promote social networks and to bridge gaps between sectors. While these are important to consider, when we understand that homelessness for Indigenous families is grounded in hundreds of years of racist and discriminatory policies and practices that systematically exclude and marginalize Indigenous Peoples, we begin to understand the breadth and depth of complexities and barriers that families face in their efforts for stability and safety. This dramatically shifts how we think about solutions, which must acknowledge and respond to deeply entrenched structural violence and focus on changes to discriminatory systems and structures.

There is a need for authentic and sincere engagement with Indigenous families, service providers, policymakers and spiritual leaders to co-create models of housing and supports for healing that are gendered and safe. First and foremost, responses to homelessness should be grounded in the definitions and dimensions of homelessness for Indigenous Peoples as articulated by ASCHH (2012) and Thistle (2017) and to create housing models and policy reform that are grounded in building connection, embracing cultures, identities and multiple knowledge's. Since data collection occurred in this study, the Aboriginal Standing Committee on Housing and Homelessness has initiated several projects including one to assess Calgary's Indigenous specific housing supply and one to develop a housing model that will be 'family first'. Both are aligned with one of their key strategic priorities which is to advocate for and support an Indigenous housing continuum that includes sustainable, supportive housing for vulnerable and at-risk Indigenous populations (ASCHH, 2019b).

Safe housing must be understood as a basic human right in which every person has the right to dignified living (Canada Without Poverty, 2019). To achieve dignified living would disrupt the cycle of structural violence by demanding anti-oppression laws, prioritizing gendered and cultural responses, full inclusion of families, languages, traditions, kinship and community supports. Elders and spiritual leaders, and flexible resources to keep families together, grounded in healing, not just housing, are necessary.

Conclusion

This study examined how structural violence affects homelessness for Indigenous families within five distinct themes: jurisdictional separation between sectors; racism; lack of safety; the need for family and limited opportunities to heal from trauma. The women in our study all experienced structural violence in their search for housing and their experiences of homelessness. To be gendered and culturally safe, there is a need to disrupt structural violence and racism in policy and public and social systems to ensure that Indigenous families do not face undue and unjust hardships. In taking a human rights approach and providing dignified living for all, policy-makers could interrupt the cycles of harm experienced by Indigenous women and their families. Future research could engage landlords and policy makers in discussions of structural racism and/or learn from the experiences of families who have had success in exiting homelessness and finding support to heal from trauma to further develop a gendered and culturally safe model of housing.

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Appendix 1: Definitions

Family: May include those who are a primary source of love and support in the lives of an Indigenous person (Blackstock et al., 2004), expanding beyond immediate kin to distant relatives and, potentially, whole Indigenous communities.

First Nation: Used to identify Indigenous Peoples of Canada who are not Métis or Inuit, and who are original inhabitants of Canada, and were the first to encounter European contact, settlement and trade.

Harm reduction: Refers to policies, programs, and practices that aim to reduce harm associated with the use of substances.

Housing First (HF): As a philosophy, HF is a belief that all people deserve housing and anyone can be supported into housing directly from homelessness. A main tenet of HF is a harm reduction approach that does not require sobriety to acquire housing.

Indigenous: A term that represents the group of people settled prior to European colonization (Navia, Henderson, & First Charger, 2018), encompassing First Nations people, Inuit people, and Métis people.

Inuit: Used to identify Indigenous people in northern Canada, living mainly in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, northern Québec, and Labrador. Inuit people are not covered by the Indian Act.

Intergenerational trauma: When untreated trauma-related stress experienced by survivors is passed on to subsequent generations. Commonly used in the context of Indigenous survivors of residential schools.

Jurisdiction: Tensions between federal, provincial, and/or municipal funders regarding who is financially responsible can affect service delivery for Indigenous populations (e.g., health and educational funding on reserve are the responsibility of the federal government while off reserve are the responsibility of the provincial government). Jurisdictional barriers may be imagined or perceived, as there is often no legal enforcement of responsibilities at the various levels of an agency or system.

Métis: Used to identify people who are of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry. Métis people are now covered under the Indian Act.

Relative homelessness: Refers to housing that fails to meet basic standards (e.g., overcrowding, unsafe); those at risk of homelessness (e.g., doubling-up or couch-surfing); those in transition (e.g., women or youth fleeing from abuse); those who are temporarily without a dwelling (e.g., home lost for a relatively short period of time due to natural disasters or a change in economic or personal situation), and; those living in long-term institutions (Goering et al., 2014).

Safety: Includes safety from emotional, mental, and physical threat of harm. Further, as Indigenous Peoples in Canada have been and continue to be subject to structural and interpersonal racial microaggressions, power dynamics, and marginalization due to Canada's colonial history (Coulthard, 2014), safety in this report also includes the concept of cultural safety. Cultural safety refers to having one's identity accepted, included, and unquestioned (Williams, 1999).

Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT): An assessment tool for frontline workers at agencies that work with homeless clients to prioritize which of those clients should receive priority for housing assistance.

Stable housing: To be living in one's own room, apartment, or house, with an expected duration of residence greater than or equal to six months (Goering et al., 2014).

Structural Violence: describes how social structures (e.g., economics, politics, law, religion, culture) can stop individuals, groups, and societies from reaching their full potential. These social structures are often ingrained in our society and have become so normalized in how we understand our world, that they appear almost invisible (Farmer et al., 2006).

Unstably housed: Being able to meet the requirements of stable housing (as above).